

Letter from Samuel P. Langley to Alexander Graham Bell, December 30, 1896

Private. SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION. *Washington, U.S.A.* December 30, 1896. My dear Mr. Bell:

Doctor Gill's remark that the National Museum is "hardly of the second and not much above the third range of our museums in this country and abroad", is explained by him as meaning that first class museums are those of Great Britain, France, Germany and the like, second class like those of Denmark and Sweden; and the third class like those of this country, including that of New York, and also of such places as Edinburgh, Florence, etc.

If this means that the appropriations for, and the demands upon, the National Museum, do not allow it any more funds for increase than are possessed by the museums of a third rate European capital like Dresden, the charge against our Government, though put in an exaggerated form, is not without foundation.

If it is cited to mean-what I am sure Doctor Gill does not intend-that this museum is of the third class compared with those of its own country, it is a wholly unfounded statement.

The National Museum ranks, as a whole, with any in the United States, in spite of insufficient appropriations and lamentable lack of buildings, in spite of the exacting demands of the Government which compel 2 its officers to themselves labor in despoiling its collections every year for national expositions (as at New Orleans, Madrid, Chicago, and Atlanta,) in spite of the fact that it is a great depot of supply from which every congressman sends cabinets of mineral and natural history specimens to his constituents, in spite of the fact that the great variety of collections which it receives from the Government compels it to have an expensively numerous staff of assistants, in spite of these and many more things which weigh on it as compared with the private museum,

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leaving it no proportion of its income to expend on acquisitions;—the Museum yes holds the prominent position that it does to-day, and she's through the administrative ability of Doctor Goode, and also through the zeal and unselfishness of his assistants, two-thirds of the curators actually serving without pay , from love of the work — not a condition of things which can be the basis of permanent good administration, but a striking evidence of the enthusiasm which he has aroused for the work and the spirit in which and the difficulties under which it is being carried on.

Doctor Gill, whose letter I can show you if necessary, is very careful to make clear his meaning that the Institution's deficiencies are not due to lack of management, but to a lack of Congressional support. He says:

“Much of the wanting material could have been purchased, but there were no funds for such a purpose. + + The late Doctor Goode had the most liberal views in this respect, and the largest liberty of execution which the hearty interest of the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution could afford, but he, as well as the Secretary of the Institution must be relieved of blame, in so much that they have not had the funds at their disposal to remedy the deficiency. I take the liberty of adding x x x that I cannot share the belief 3 that the National Museum would gain by divorce from the Institution”.

I am, dear Mr. Bell, Very truly yours, S. P. Langley A. Graham Bell, Esq., 1331 Connecticut Avenue.